

Wither the Two Cultures?

Nearly fifty years ago C. P. Snow delivered his famous “Two Cultures” lecture, deploring the state of affairs in which the humanities, especially those who believed in constructionism, had intellectually diverged from the sciences. Scientists didn’t care about Shakespeare; while literists bragged about not knowing any math.

But pick up a modern popular novel and it’s hard to see this criticism holding much weight. All the literary outlets have been touting Thomas Pynchon’s new tome, *Against the Day*. Pynchon’s novels, as eminent literist Scott McLemee put it, discuss “the domains of information theory, mathematical physics, cosmology” with frequent references to such subjects as “William Hamilton’s quaternions or Georg Riemann’s zeta function” in which the Michelson-Morley experiment takes center stage.

It’s hard to imagine anything but a new Richard Feynman book could do more to warm a scientist’s heart.

Meanwhile, take Jonathan Franzen’s bestseller, *The Corrections* (even an Oprah’s book club pick!). The book, which revolves around the dot-com economic upturn, not only features frequent and detailed references to eigenvector-based computer algorithms, advances in neurological technology, and odd properties of electrophoresis, but even features a main character who goes from being in that most constructivist of professions — left-wing literary criticism — to a job building dot-com websites.

It seems geekiness has gone mainstream. And along with it, the geeky culture of scientism now butts up against the aesthete culture of literism. It’s hard to see how anyone can take the two cultures complaints seriously anymore.

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